

HUMAN CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING: IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Kuldip Kaur; Nirwan Idrus
Open University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The conviction that education is fundamental to employment, and that productive employment is central to improved livelihood, underlies several global initiatives. In order to enhance enterprise competence among the employed workforce, and to cater for the human resource needs in a country, education must respond to global changes and economic developments (Gopinathan, 2005). To support the growing need for human capacity building, such a response would include lifelong education, formal and non-formal education and training, as well as inter-institution collaboration. Central to this perspective is the recognition of prior learning (RPL), that is, the acknowledgement of competencies accrued through worklife skills, experiential learning and non-formal training against academic learning outcomes and competence standards. However, given the traditionalist posture taken by most Malaysian institutions of higher education, an emerging issue with regards to the provision of prior learning credit through RPL is ensuring institutional capacity in prior learning assessment and the provision of learning support for students wishing to express prior learning for RPL. This paper discusses a number of issues related to the implementation of RPL, as well as to the mechanisms used to harness the competence, experience and abilities of employed adults seeking further education.

We are now at a point where we must educate our children in what no one knew yesterday, and prepare our schools for what no one knows yet. ~ Margaret Mead

BUILDING HUMAN CAPACITY

The global thrust for improving access to education, particularly higher education, is preceded by the conviction that education is fundamental to employment. In turn, employment and productivity help create livelihoods that nourish the human mind and spirit. Chiefly as a response to global changes, a number of international organisations have called for a concerted attempt to improve training and individual competency through higher education (HE). Among these is the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Beijing, which in the year 2001 emphasised the importance of human capacity building and the development of necessary country-specific policies and programmes to respond to the challenges of human capacity building. During this Human Capacity Building Forum (May 15-16, 2001), the following strategies were recommended for this purpose:

- Setting up a life-long education and building a learning society.
- Strengthening managerial and employee training and enhancing enterprise competence in the context of economic globalisation.
- Integrating resources and promoting overall human capacity building.

Indeed these are challenging propositions made to higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly those operating in the Asia-Pacific rim. And five years on, these strategies have become the thrust of a number of initiatives related to human capital development in Malaysia, viz. the 9th Malaysia Plan (2006), the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (2003/6) and the "Zahid" Higher Education Report themed *Towards Excellence* (2005).

In order to further enhance competencies among the *employed* workforce, and to respond appropriately to the human resource need in a country, this includes the recognition of *both* formal and non-formal education and training, as well as a concerted effort toward inter-institution collaboration. To support sustainable effort toward human capacity building, there is a need to "establish accessible wide and multi-dimensional learning networks to enable the whole community," particularly, "disadvantaged groups to have access to learning throughout their work

and life.”¹ Institutions that have for decades provided only pre-employment education at the basic degree level have also to focus on the employed segment of the population. Building human capacity also means providing access to a life-long learning system that reaches out to all individuals who wish to upgrade their knowledge and skills. Additionally, education and training facilities have to adopt an approach characterised by openness, leading to the liberation of academic opportunity in the face of rapid massification of HE.

Yet, one might say that these are not terribly unreasonable propositions. Taking the perspective that education is a social good, one may argue for the use of resources in HEIs for the development of a highly skilled workforce that is both assiduous and qualified for the challenges brought on by globalisation. A more convincing argument for increasing HE access and opportunity is one linked to a country’s overall economic and social development. As proposed by the Beijing Forum, this may be brought on by “recognizing the critical importance of human capital by developing more integrated approaches to capacity building, innovating in policy development and program delivery, and increasing inputs from all channels.”² Ultimately, these arguments call for the democratisation of education, which is to say that HE has to move away from an elitist stance to a more learning-oriented enterprise, i.e. an approach that lends a hand to the advancement of capacity in areas such as literacy, ICT knowledge and workplace skills. As educationists, we therefore face the responsibility of supporting institutional investment in human capital for the purpose of cultivating a workforce that is better prepared to function in the networked knowledge economy of today.

RECOGNISING PRIOR LEARNING

The democratisation of education also demands that we hold a broader view of education, one that recognises learning that is accrued through formal and informal means and that which *precedes* admission into a programme of study. The learning-oriented view postulated by the strategies forwarded during the Beijing Forum (2001), viz. setting up life-long education, building a learning society, strengthening employee training, enhancing enterprise competence in the context of economic globalisation, integrating resources and promoting the overall human capacity building, all demand the recognition of humans as learning-oriented entities. Their capacity to learn, to assume responsibility and to become more competent is to be further strengthened by access to an instructional programme at an HEI. Such calls for recognition are echoed in the several countries, chief among which are the UK, Australia and New Zealand. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, UK (2004) states:

The emerging agenda for higher education... promotes lifelong learning, social inclusion, wider participation, employability and partnership[s]... [Thus] the accreditation of learning and achievement is one of the central functions of HE. In exercising this function, HE providers are increasingly considering how learning that has taken place in a range of contexts may be assessed and formally recognised through accreditation.

One may assume two fundamental assumptions in taking this stance, one academic and one cultural. The former takes the view that because humans are life-time students, there is reason to continuously strive to reach one’s potential. Thus, learning can never be impeded, restricted or curtailed and the educationist endeavours to provide for the intellectual hunger in each of us. By virtue of being spaces where people interact *to learn*, HEIs provide the facilities necessary for intellectual growth to take place. The latter premise holds that as many emerging economies are somewhat limited in their capacity to provide HE for everyone, only those with favourable conditions – usually economic or intellectual – are able to partake in HE. Hence, the cultural marginalisation of groups of willing learners – who are commonly characterised as low-income, female, having large families or disabled – may be addressed through a policy of *openness*. To fall back on the argument of using the social good to provide for the willing and educationally

¹ See *Opportunities for Further Work* at http://www.apec.org/apec/apec_groups/other_apec_groups/human_capacity_building

² Ibid

needy would be largely appropriate in this context. In tandem, the two assumptions argued for above provide the basis of a social evolution: the democratisation of education for the purpose of building human capacity.

IMPLEMENTING RPL

It follows that the *recognition of human capacity to learn* is an antecedent to the recognition of prior or experiential learning. Recognition, therefore, acknowledges competencies accrued through worklife skills, experiential learning and non-formal training against academic learning outcomes and competence standards. Although RPL has been exercised in the USA since the 1970's, there is no generic template for its implementation at the institutional level (Evans, 2000). Economic, social and academic factors in each country determine the development of an RPL framework that is workable or one that is tenable for all disciplines. However, as pointed out by Evans (2000), the implementation of RPL demands that conscientious and systematic attention be paid to all internal processes in an HEI. Needless to say, tradition-based practices in HEIs – distance learning institutions included – will have to change to accommodate a number of processes unique to RPL. Further, the practice of using uni-modal systems for all institutional practices such as assessment, interaction, learning material development and communication has to give way to innovative and multi-modal structures that are relevant to the new agenda. Thus, an emerging issue with regards to the provision of prior learning credit through RPL is *ensuring institutional capacity in prior learning assessment and the provision of support for students in their attempts to articulate prior learning for RPL*.

Let us take a case in point. In Malaysia, the need for developing competencies of the workforce and for investment in human capital has paved the way for Open Entry³ (OE) and RPL in selected HEIs. Distance learning providers such as Open University Malaysia (OUM) have been identified as the prime movers in this scheme. According to the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (2003/6), RPL involves the assessment of knowledge, skills and understanding gained outside formal education through challenge tests, performance records, reports and products according to predetermined criteria and standards. Such criteria may be drawn from course learning outcomes and programme objectives. Assessment, therefore, may not always be in the form of simple pen-and-paper tests; often written submissions are examined alongside oral presentations and/or demonstrations as evidence of learning. In an HEI such as OUM, implementing RPL means that institutional processes must be designed to accommodate the needs of (possibly, a large number of) students who will apply for prior learning credit and may present evidence of learning in a *variety* of formats.

As indicated in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below, the OE initiative has resulted in a huge response to a number of OUM's distance learning programmes. In addition to this, OUM has more than 40,000 students enrolled through General Entry in the many programmes offered in several different fields of study. Although not every Open Entry or General Entry candidate will apply for RPL, the fact remains that the thousands of students currently on the university's register may soon be eligible for RPL. It is therefore timely that HEIs on the verge of implementing RPL pay due consideration to a number of issues that are directly related to this scheme.

³ All HEIs specify admission requirements to various programmes offered. At OUM, students admitted through *Open Entry* are those who are at least 21 years of age and have lower secondary qualifications (PMR/LCE/or equivalent). Those admitted through *General Entry* hold (at least/the equivalent of) the Malaysian secondary school leaving certificate (SPM/MCE) and meet other requirements for their programme of study.

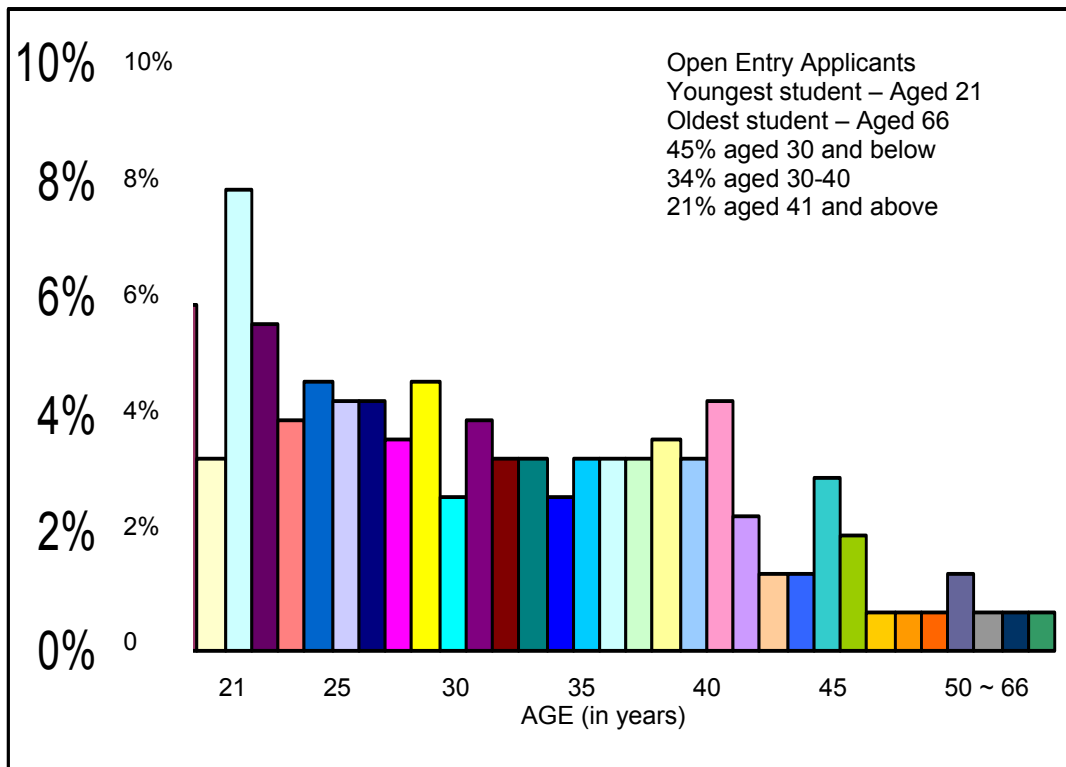


Figure 1 Percentage of open entry applicants at Open University Malaysia by age (July 2006)

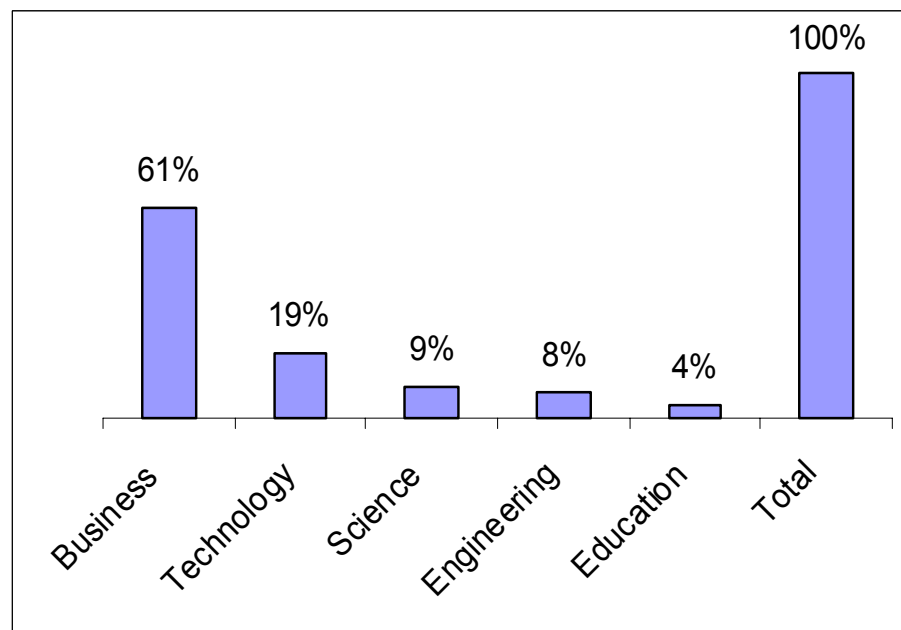


Figure 2 Percentage of open entry applicants at Open University Malaysia by programme (August 2006)

A number of concerns related to institutional capacity in prior learning assessment require attention before the RPL initiative can be successfully implemented in an HEI. Some of these are outlined below.

Candidates' ability to demonstrate learning

An important area of concern is RPL candidates' ability to demonstrate prior learning or to provide evidence of learning (Clark and Lakin, 2005). This may be in written or oral form, through demonstration or in a specific format required by the HEI. Some of the skills required for this purpose are: to reflect upon and assess learning that has been achieved through experience; analyse what they have learnt and how this experience relates to their discipline; and describe the learning path to provide a perspective on their professional development. In addition to this, demonstrating prior learning in written form – such as through a portfolio – means that candidates have to use language effectively to communicate prior learning. This area demands some attention as engaging in a narrative or descriptive display of one's development would be a challenge to candidates who have not been involved in academic work for a long period of time.

Using appropriate methods of assessment

A second issue in RPL is the use of appropriate ways to fully recognise and evaluate learning and competency. Current assessment formats in most HEIs involve paper-and-pen tests that evaluate and recognise knowledge, comprehension and application of learnt content, communicative ability, and/or numeracy skills. Such assessment and instructional methods may not lend themselves to the recognition of evidence of prior learning by a candidate. On the other hand, RPL assessment methods that have been used in the field include on-the-job observations/video-recordings, one-on-one interviews, oral presentations, portfolios, and demonstration of work in a real setting (Clark and Lakin, 2005). Ironically, the unfamiliarity of these prior learning assessment techniques may itself be an impediment to eliciting the very competencies we wish to colligate and the processes we wish to encourage.

Matching prior learning to course requirements

Thirdly, matching prior learning to course requirements is neither straightforward nor uncomplicated. The reality is that prior learning and competency do not follow the stated outcomes of a course, and neither do they result from a singular experience. The task of colligating and finding commonalities among a *series of* learning events is difficult as is determining gaps in knowledge related to a particular course or discipline – both for the candidate and for the assessor. Further, professional practice calls for a number of competencies not commonly taught in HE, e.g. collaboration, resolution of ethical issues, management skills, cross-cultural communication, indirect job-related research (Clark and Lakin, 2005). Such competence may be difficult to capture without a comprehensive and well-thought out system for RPL assessment.

These issues may be addressed in a number of ways, such as by matching candidates to assessors who have similar work experience or by providing candidates with clear criteria for what to demonstrate as evidence of prior learning. There is also a need to provide the support necessary for candidates to demonstrate evidence of prior learning by showing models of portfolios or by talking through their experiences. More important is the need for a new agenda in HE, and to clearly define the role of HEIs in human capacity building. We need to make a concerted effort to bring HE closer to the work world, and to make apparent the *relevance* of HE to the workplace. To begin, the adaptation of class activity to accommodate activity indigenous to work contexts may be considered an important move. As indicated in the 9th Malaysia Plan, tertiary and training institutions need to become more aligned with industry in order to better meet the needs of employers (p.7). Another worthwhile endeavour is that outlined in a recent report themed *Towards Excellence* by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, (2005): academics in HEIs should work closely with professionals outside universities in the development of relevant curricula and evaluation procedures (p.xxx/xxxiv).

A third strategy is to evaluate and revise institution-centric processes so that they are more aligned to the needs of a modern HE enterprise. The Malaysian Quality Framework (2003/6) encourages HEIs to provide learning pathways that logically link one qualification with another to suit the diverse purposes of education and training (p.3). There are also calls to enable students

to select the most appropriate learning option for themselves, especially when dealing with adult learners. Thus, prior learning credit awarded through assessment of individual knowledge and skills will be better situated if programmes of study have well-defined pathways and are aligned to the *profession*-oriented goals of education and training.

CONCLUSION

To find a balance between traditionalist views on HE and workforce development needs, one must first recognise that formal education is not the only pathway towards human capital development. Further, the need for RPL is more acute in emerging economies to reduce the cost of foreign labour as well as to provide for individuals who have been denied access to formal education. The RPL initiative also allows a profession to articulate its curricular needs rather than importing curricula that may not be directly related to a country's economic development. As discussed above, a number of issues have to be addressed as we take this path to human capital development. These issues acquire significance as we embark upon an educational agenda that is responsive to country-specific needs, and one that demands change in HEIs wishing to make conscious decisions about academic quality and standards.

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